



*United States Attorney
Southern District of New York*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
FEBRUARY 27, 2004

CONTACT: U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
MARVIN SMILON, HERBERT HADAD
MICHAEL KULSTAD
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE
(212) 637-2600

UNITED STATES ARRAIGNS VENEZUELAN
HEROIN KINGPIN FROM COLOMBIA

DAVID N. KELLEY, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today the extradition and arraignment of RAMIRO LOPEZ-IMITOLA ("IMITOLA"), the head of a heroin trafficking organization based in Colombia and Venezuela (the "Organization") responsible for importing more than 2,000 kilograms of heroin, worth an estimated \$200 million into the United States since 1997.

At present, 17 members of the Organization have been arrested, and more than 50 kilograms of heroin seized in what has been described by Venezuelan and United States law enforcement as one of the largest joint heroin prosecutions ever brought. IMITOLA was formally extradited from Colombia on February 26, 2004, and is scheduled to be arraigned before United States Magistrate Judge THEODORE H. KATZ later today.

The charges were the result of a joint investigation involving cooperation by the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force ("OCDETF"), the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("BICE"), the New York City Police Department ("NYPD"), and the New York State Police, together with the Colombian National Police and the Venezuelan Judicial Police.

According to a two-count Indictment and the formal request for extradition (the "Extradition Package"), IMITOLA used human couriers recruited in both Venezuela and the United States to smuggle heroin into the United States from Venezuela by either ingesting pellets of heroin or carrying suitcases in which heroin had been secreted. According to the Indictment, during the life of the conspiracy, IMITOLA sent as many as 60 couriers per month. The heroin was imported into Venezuela from Colombia, and then transported by the couriers to various locations in the United States.

To insure that these couriers would not attempt to steal from the Organization or later cooperate against members of the Organization, IMITOLA and other members of the Organization used torture and intimidation, the Indictment and Extradition Package alleged. For example, according to the Indictment, IMITOLA or one of his representatives would meet with the couriers at the time they were recruited and compel them to provide the Organization with information regarding the couriers' families,

with the threat that harm would come to them and their families if they did not comply with the directives of the Organization. Similarly, when one of the couriers stole approximately \$200,000 of the proceeds from the sale of the Organization's heroin, the courier was tortured until he/she told the Organization the location of the money that had been stolen, it was charged. Other couriers were told of this by senior members of the Organization to instill fear and to ensure their compliance with the orders of the Organization, the Indictment and Extradition Package alleged.

According to the Indictment, IMITOLA sent as many as seven couriers at a time, traveling in a group, frequently in first class to avoid attention from authorities. Although the couriers entered the United States in different cities, they primarily traveled to Manhattan, where they met with other members of the Organization in hotels, where they delivered the heroin and received money for the Organization. They then returned to Venezuela with hundreds of thousands of dollars, which was delivered to IMITOLA or one of his representatives, the Indictment and Extradition Package alleged.

According to the Indictment and Extradition Package, in order to permit the couriers to travel to the United States, IMITOLA illegally obtained United States travel visas for couriers to travel to the United States at a price of approximately \$1,500 to \$2,500. Further, IMITOLA and members of

the Organization paid a law enforcement officer who worked at the Simon Bolivar International Airport in Caracas, Venezuela, approximately \$1,500 to \$2,000 per courier per trip. In return, the law enforcement officer made sure that the couriers cleared through any security checks at the airport, and intercede if any other law enforcement officer detained one of the couriers, it was charged.

According to the Extradition Package and Indictment, at least one of the couriers who ingested heroin died in Miami, Florida, of a heroin overdose after one of the pellets that he had ingested burst open. IMITOLA directed others in the Organization to bring the courier's body to individuals that IMITOLA knew in Florida, who would cut open the body of the courier to retrieve the heroin. In the alternative, IMITOLA offered the Organization member \$10,000 to cut open the body himself. The Organization member refused, and dumped the body (which still contained 88 pellets of heroin) into Biscayne Bay, Miami Beach, Florida, where it was recovered by the Miami Beach Police Department.

According to the Extradition Package, IMITOLA was arrested by the Colombian National Police near Cucuta, Colombia, pursuant to a provisional arrest warrant on April 4, 2003.

If convicted, IMITOLA faces a maximum sentence of life in prison and a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years in prison. The Indictment also seeks forfeiture from IMITOLA of \$200

million, based on his importation of approximately 2,000 kilograms of heroin into the United States.

Mr. KELLEY praised the cooperative investigative efforts of OCDETF, which consists of DEA, BICE, the NYPD and the New York State Police. He also praised the Miami Beach Police Department, the Colombian National Police and the Venezuelan Judicial Police. He said the investigation is continuing.

Assistant United States Attorneys NEIL M. BAROFSKY and VICTOR L. HOU are in charge of the prosecution.

The charges contained in the indictment are merely accusations and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

04-40

###